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Beyond the Clinic: California's Vet Telemedicine Bill

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As California goes, so goes the nation. Time will tell if this popular saying rings true with respect to California's recent enactment of Assembly Bill 1399 (AB 1399), which allows a veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) to be established remotely and eliminates California's traditional minimum standard of in-person examination prior to treatment recommendation and prescription of medications.

The legislation, which became effective on January 1, 2024, progressed despite strong opposition from prominent organizations like the California Veterinary Medical Association, American Veterinary Medical Association, and others. Critics of AB 1399 have voiced concerns about potential diagnostic inaccuracies, cost escalation, ineffective treatment plans, and detrimental delays in diagnoses and therapies through the use of telemedicine under the guidelines set forth in AB 1399.

The bill's passage even with strong opposition indicates a shift in perception of telemedicine within the veterinary field as a tool to increase access to care in the midst of a veterinarian shortage. The bill's supporters, including the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, San Diego Humane Society, and Virtual Veterinary Care Association, argue that telemedicine can offer improved care access, especially in rural communities and shelter medicine, and for animals with significant behavioral issues. Supporters also noted California veterinarians would utilize their training, experience and education in appropriate ways that would continue to be overseen by the California Veterinary Medical Board.

Many states relaxed in-person examination requirements when the pandemic made in-person veterinary visits challenging or impossible. While many of the states have since reinstated their in-person examination requirements, California's AB 1399 instead codifies the previously temporary practice.

AB 1399 was amended numerous times during the legislative season to address concerns and the enacted language incorporates certain measures to address potential risks. These include limiting audio-only communication in establishing a VCPR, restricting telehealth practice to California-licensed individuals, and controlling the prescribing of certain medications via telehealth.

While concerns about the potential risks of telemedicine persist, California's legislation is a shift in favor of utilization of digital technologies for the practice of veterinary medicine. The debate surrounding telemedicine in the veterinary sphere will continue, with the rest of the

country keeping a close eye on California's successes or failures from AB 1399.

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